

Inside Philanthropy

Help Wanted: How to Remove Barriers to Hiring Fundraisers From Other Fields



Gabrielle Kurlander (center), chief executive at the All Stars Project, which works with inner-city youth, says she prefers hiring fundraisers coming from other careers because experienced development officers are “entrenched.”

Credit: Ronald L. Glassman

By: Holly Hall, May 28, 2020

When Sergio Gonzalez was interviewed for the top advancement position at the University of Miami, he had no fundraising experience.

“When I heard there was an advancement job in Miami at the VP level, I wasn’t sure what advancement was,” he recalls.

But as a lawyer working in county government, Gonzalez had a good professional track record and extensive knowledge of the local community. He got the job and stayed for 16 years.

Angela Davis was unhappy working in pharmaceutical sales, so she spent two years saving enough money to leave her position. Shortly after doing so, she noticed an opening for a major gift officer at Temple University, her alma mater. Like Gonzalez, she got the job. She loves the work, has since been promoted, and even won an award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education, a group for fundraisers in higher education.

Yet, more often than not, candidates like Gonzalez and Davis are not taken seriously by nonprofit organizations seeking to fill mid-level and senior fundraising jobs. “Hiring managers too quickly jump to the conclusion that nontraditional candidates won’t work out,” says Ron Schiller, founding partner of the Aspen Leadership Group, an executive recruiting company that specializes in fundraising searches.

Scott Nichols, who recently retired after leading a \$1.8 billion campaign at Boston University, admits that he was against hiring fundraisers from other professions until one of his colleagues convinced him to reconsider. He ended up having such a positive experience with someone who had a background in retail that Nichols hired him for three fundraising jobs over the years at Boston University and Harvard Law.

Nonprofit leaders would do well to follow Nichols’ example and be open to [nontraditional candidates](#) for development openings, particularly since there is a shortage of fundraisers nationwide and the profession is rife with turnover. People coming to fundraising from other fields, energized by a new career path, often stay longer than the relatively short tenures of development officers reported in annual surveys by the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

While most nonprofit organizations looking to hire a development officer would choose a person with extensive fundraising experience over someone coming from a different field, some experienced charity leaders now take the opposite view.

“We’ve gotten to the point of preferring career changers or people who come from a background in nonprofit programs more often than experienced fundraisers,” says **Gabrielle Kurlander, chief executive officer of the All Stars Project**, a charity that works with inner-city youth in five states.

“What we’ve found is that if you hire someone with a significant background in fundraising, they can be less willing to adapt, and have certain entrenched ways of doing things,” Kurlander says. “When you hire a career changer, they are more open to learning and are not

solidified in how they approach things.”

To combat the scarcity of fundraisers and help charitable organizations recruit candidates from other fields into development roles, nonprofit leaders and executive recruiters offer the following tips:

Remove unnecessary requirements from want ads.

“It all really starts with the job description,” says Jeff Vessels, director of principal and leadership gifts at the American Civil Liberties Union in New York. “So often, job descriptions are full of requirements that are not essential, like a certain number of years of experience.” That automatically excludes people seeking to make a career shift into fundraising from another profession.

Vessels says that he once hired a community organizer for a fundraising position after asking the woman how she’d respond to a hypothetical donor who, upon being told about an ACLU program, bluntly exclaimed, “I would never support that program.” The community organizer calmly replied that she would assure the donor that “most supporters don’t agree with everything we do,” and move the conversation to an issue the donor did care about. As a community organizer, the job candidate had run into similar situations with people who objected to what she was trying to do.

Don’t rush the hiring process. Many organizations are so eager for development staff that they move too quickly to interview a small number of people with the exact qualities they think are necessary, Vessels says. “This is a shortcut, when you should really take more time.”

Vessels recalls another candidate for a frontline fundraising role whose direct marketing background “really did not jump out at all in a large stack of applications.” But when the candidate was asked in an interview about scenarios with donors, her answers stood out from all other applicants, and she got the job.

“The person who emerged from the search was not the person I expected, since she did not have the experience of working face to face with donors,” Vessels says. “This was only because I decided to take more time and slow down. Otherwise, this candidate would never have gotten in the door.”

Put more emphasis on transferable skills.

“Unwillingness on the part of the fundraising profession to pay attention to transferable skills has not only diminished the pipeline of talent, but also diminished success in objectives for the profession to become more diverse,” says Schiller of the Aspen Leadership Group.

“We’re missing out on plenty of people with strong skills and relevant passion who could put those skills to work for something that matters deeply to them,” he adds. “It makes no sense that the pipeline has narrowed

to include only those who started their careers in development.”

To assess how suitable a person is for a fundraising position, asking job candidates questions about how they build relationships or their connection to the organization’s mission can reveal qualified people, even among those with scant fundraising experience, says the ACLU’s Vessels.

“For me, it is looking for certain qualities, such as someone who enjoys people, is good at conversation, is inquisitive, and knows how to ask questions that will get supporters to talk,” he says. “I look for people who are eager and have a bias to action, a sense of direction. I look for qualities that are transferable.”

Invest in fundraisers coming from other fields.

Executive director Bonny Gildin, the lead fundraiser at the San Francisco chapter of the All Stars Project, the charity working with inner-city youth, says she also likes to ask potential fundraisers from other professions what skills they have that will transfer into a new money-raising role with her organization.

But Gildin says a second question is essential: What do you think you need to learn to succeed in the fundraising position? “The person interviewing the candidate should really listen to the answers to those questions,” Gildin says. “I like a serious answer about what the candidate needs to learn.”

After getting more information on existing and needed skills, it is important to fill a newly hired fundraiser’s needs. One of Gildin’s colleagues, **Patricio Delgado,** worked as a counselor with young people in crisis—those who attempted suicide, runaways, substance abusers—for seven years before joining the **All Stars Project’s New York office** as its new fundraising manager.

“What I appreciated about All Stars is that they invested in me,” Delgado says. “There was a lot of conversation internally between me and my supervisor, as well as the director of development. They took me under their wing.”

In addition to providing internal training, All Stars sent Delgado to fundraising training sessions, including the huge annual conference of the Association of Fundraising Professionals.

“That helped me understand best practices, and also to meet other fundraisers,” he says. “It helped me see I am part of a very large community. I am appreciative of the investment. If we need to build fundraisers, we need to invest in them.”